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Fusion Centers Critical to Nation's Intelligence Network

Fusion Centers could be the critical ingredient to maximizing and melding intelligence collected at the state and local levels into the federal homeland security enterprise, the Commanding Officer of the Los Angeles Police Department's Counter-Terrorism and Criminal Intelligence Bureau says.

Los Angeles Deputy Chief Michael Downing, a Center for Homeland Defense and Security Executive Leaders Program alumnus, spoke to 29 members of the CHDS Fusion Center Leaders Program (FCLP). The FCLP was held Feb. 17-21.



Michael Downing discusses intelligence collection with FCLP students.

The FCLP brings together leaders from the national network of fusion centers to discuss topics such as strategy, policy and organizational design, covering intelligence analysis, leadership, production and dissemination of information. Modules are taught by experts in their fields and aimed at real-world issues fusion centers face.

San Diego Sheriff's Department Lt. Anthony Ray, Deputy Director of the San Diego Law Enforcement Coordination Center (SD-LECC), said modules on fusion center relevance, collection processes, SAR processes, defining and managing intelligence production expectations and risk management were the most valuable segments, but each session included applicable lessons.

"The SD-LECC is in the process of revising its SAR process, and the module on Intelligence Analysis with a focus on Suspicious Activity Reporting hit the mark," Ray said. "This module provided the framework for implementing a SAR process with a vetting structure to support quality control. Our analysts have met with the facilitator of this module, and we are currently working on integrating the process into the SD-LECC's operation."

Downing offered FCLP students his insight into intelligence collection in the Los Angeles area and discussed how to improve upon the dispersed structure of intelligence and law enforcement agencies.

"How do we take advantage of de-centralized law enforcement structure and decentralized fusion center structure to complement domestic criminal intelligence efforts?" said Downing. "I think fusion centers are perfectly positioned to leverage the decentralized law enforcement structure and be the legitimate platform that can ultimately feed the federal information-sharing environment with needed criminal intelligence based on fact."

Fusion Centers provide authoritative, street-level intelligence and have positive reputations for building alliances with peer agencies, he added. For intelligence collectors, providing relevant information begins with a periodic threat domain assessment and then forming collection plans tailored to those priorities.

"The emphasis this FCLP 1401 cohort placed on Collection is an example of how serious our fusion center leaders are about understanding and implementing the intelligence process," said Robert Simeral, FCLP program director and NPS faculty member. "The level of discussions and sharing of smart practices in the classroom is impressive; and that's the real value of the FCLP, facilitated by expert faculty and speakers who are distinguished in their professions."

Gauging threats in Los Angeles is no small task with its massive critical infrastructure networks and blend of ethnicities and nationalities. Approximately 200 languages are regularly spoken among residents and the city is home to a large diaspora of Iranians, Pakistanis and Afghans, among others.

"We have diaspora in our area with families living in countries that are becoming failed states," Downing said. "What happens in Pakistan in the morning affects the United States that afternoon, especially in the multi-ethnic melting pot of Los Angeles."

Downing shared a 2011 priority list outlining the LAPD's Counter Terrorism and Special Operations Bureau's information needs. They included identifying organizational structures of al-Qaida Central and al-Shabab based in Somalia. The aim was to track the organization's goals down to potential members in Los Angeles while identifying characteristics of local members, preferred modes of communication and recruiting methods.

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Local intelligence collection is key to filling the missing pieces. The LAPD has adapted an approach used in its fight against the city's infamous gangs, using a community policing approach that mixes law enforcement and community outreach to communities that may feel oppressed and more likely to resort to some form of extremism.

"We're trying to engage our people to be collectors of intelligence with an eye toward dismantling terrorist groups or operations," Downing said. "We combine ideas of community policing and synthesize with the principles of counter-insurgency. You can't win this fighting in the street."

The depth and breadth of intelligence gathering of the Los Angeles area may be a financial and planning challenge for many state and local governments, but Downing cited a blueprint developed by the Major Cities Chiefs Criminal Intelligence Enterprise, comprising the departments from the nation's 63 largest cities. In addition to providing a methodology for establishing threat assessments and collection modes, the document calls for increased connectivity among state and local intelligence operations, the national network of fusion centers and the federal intelligence enterprise.

His experience in completing the CHDS Executive Leaders Program has been invaluable, he said, as has teaching at the Center.

"The ELP gives you the framework to think outside your discipline," he said. "It creates a network that I've often used the past four years since I completed the program. When I teach this FCLP class, I always leave with more than I came with. The reputation of CHDS is worldwide. The stature it has brings legitimacy. It helps keep us engaged."

FCLP is sponsored by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and was developed based on input from interagency partners, including the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and Department of Justice (DOJ), and state and local partners through the Criminal Intelligence Coordinating Council (CICC) and National Fusion Center Association (NFCA).

"The FCLP reinforced what we all so tragically learned from 9/11 and from terrorist plots since," Maryland State Police Superintendent Marcus Brown said. "The threat against our country is real and we will succeed or fail based on the communication and coordination between all levels of law enforcement. It is obvious that the FCLP instructors participate in this program for one reason; they know that continually improving our intelligence capacities is our best defense against terrorism."

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